IDIS (2008) 1:221–228
DOI 10.1007/s12394-009-0013-7

Dissidentity

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Received: 31 March 2008 / Accepted: 26 February 2009 / Published online: 21 April 2009

Abstract The importance of personal freedoms is commonly couched in terms of psychology, sociology, culture, and to some extent economics. This paper examines the political dimension. Dissident thought is crucial to a healthy polity, but is dependent on people being able to sustain multiple identities, and nyms.

Keywords Dissident · Contrarian · Deviant · Nym · Pseudonym · Anonym · Innovation

Introduction

There are various reasons why human identities and the protection of them are such important policy considerations in the information society. After briefly reviewing those reasons, I focus on one particular facet that is often given too little attention — the political dimension. The discussion highlights the role of human identities in enabling the survival of dissident thought. The analysis depends on a common appreciation of several key concepts, which are outlined in a preliminary section.

Identities and nyms

An entity is a real-world thing. The notion encompasses pallets piled with cartons, the cartons, artefacts such as computers and mobile phones, and animals. In the current context, the relevant category of entity is human beings. Each entity has various attributes, such as physiological characteristics.

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An identity is a presentation or role of some underlying entity. Each identity has attributes, such as performance style and preferences. Identities and attributes exist in the real world, not on disk drives. Any particular entity may be associated with any number of identities, not just one. The use of multiple identities is mostly constructive or at least harmless, but of course criminals take advantage of them too.

A particular identity may be assumed by multiple entities from time to time, or even at the same time. Many such practices are socially positive (e.g. multiple signatories on a club bank account, and multiple people performing the function of shift-manager in a continuous business process such as an oil-refinery or a help-desk). Some uses, of course, are associated with criminal behaviour (including identity fraud, and the much less common but more damaging activity of identity theft).

In the abstract world of information systems, each entity and each identity is represented by various records, each of which contains a collection of data-items, each of which represents a real-world attribute.

Organisations have increasingly come to rely on records as a means of dealing with people, rather than dealing with the people themselves. The data that is captured in a particular record relating to one of the person's identities represents a very limited model of even the identity, let alone the entity as a whole. The term 'digital persona' is useful as a means of encapsulating the limitations of the data-based models of people that organisations mostly rely on.

Some of the data-items that represent an identity are used to distinguish that particular identity from other instances of the same category. Such a data-item or items is called an identifier. Common examples are a person's commonly-used name, perhaps combined with date of birth, or some kind of organisation-imposed code, 'username' or 'login id'.

An identifier is associated with an identity or role, not directly with the underlying entity. The particular entity is distinguished by means a biometric measure of the person concerned. An appropriate term for the means of distinguishing entities from one another is an 'entifier'.

There are many circumstances in which an identity cannot be reliably associated with an underlying entity. If an identifier cannot be linked to an entity at all, then the identifier falls into the category of an 'anonym'. If the link can be achieved, but only provided that particular conditions are fulfilled, then the identifier is a pseudonym. The term 'nym' usefully encompasses both pseudonyms and anonyms.

The policy significance of identity

Identity, the plurality of identities that individuals use, and pseudonyms have long been understood to be important to the functioning of society. This section considers a series of contexts in which identities matter, in order to lay a foundation for examination of the primary context to which this essay is addressed.

In some societies, the philosophical basis for human rights and freedoms is central to the discussion. People are regarded as being very important for their own sake. The concepts of human dignity and integrity play a significant role, as do the notions of individual autonomy and self-determination. From this perspective, each human needs control over their own self, and over their own identities (in the form of the

various facets of their selves that are known to different people and institutions, and are associated with their various names, codes and partial digital personas stored on databases).

Discussions in the popular media generally bypass the philosophical issues and concern themselves with more down-to-earth aspects. The public perception is that, psychologically, people need private space. This desire exists not only behind closed doors and drawn curtains, but also in public places, wherever a reasonable expectation exists that behaviour is not subject to observation or recording. We need to be able to glance around, judge whether the people in the vicinity are a threat, and then perform actions that are potentially embarrassing, such as breaking wind, and jumping for joy. To be able to enjoy such freedoms, we need our behaviour to be anonymous (unable to be associated with us) or pseudonymous (not readily able to be associated with us).

For some people, the need to avoid discovery and recording of their identity is not merely psychological, but also a matter of physical safety. Categories of 'persons-at-risk', who are under threat of harm from others include victims of domestic violence, protected witnesses, celebrities (including not only entertainers, sport stars and politicians, but also recent lottery winners), notorieties and undercover operatives. Many organisations have means for protecting data about such people, including provisions for multiple identities and nymity.

The interests of each individual are in potential conflict with those of other individuals, groups, and society as a whole. Anonymity in particular invites abuse, because it enables people to escape responsibility for their illegal or anti-social actions.

Laws, policies and practices therefore need to be practical, and to achieve balance among the interests. There is a grave risk that impositions of requirements for disclosure of identity will go beyond what is necessary to deter psychopathic and sociopathic behaviour. Socially, people need to be free to behave, and to associate with others, subject to broad social mores, but without the continual threat of being observed. Widespread surveillance chills behaviour generally, rather than deterring specific behaviour. Societies that implement excessive social controls progressively reduce themselves and their members to the inhuman, constrained contexts that were the lot of the millions locked behind the Iron Curtain.

The needs for identity protections extend beyond the merely psychological, physical and social. Cultural vibrancy and creativity are also heavily dependent on freedoms. Artists perceive differently and perceive anew. Their artefacts, variously as 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional physical objects, and in digital text, image, sound and video forms, intentionally challenge engrained perceptions. Many artists, in many media, have found it convenient and even necessary to divorce the part of their selves that expresses their art from the other parts of themselves that live, work, and have families and friends. For example, many of the early novellists (when the novel was regarded as nothing more than 'a sustained lie') published under pseudonyms (Mullan 2008). In a review of Mullan, Schmidt (2008) reported that the white male author who recently published under the Asian female name Rahila Khan said “[pseudonyms] released me from the obligation of being what I seem”. Even in the arts, anonymity and pseudonymity can be abused, but for the most part they are a positive, enabling factor in the creation and projection of ideas.

Freedoms are also vital in economic contexts. People need to feel free to invent, and to innovate. International competition is fierce, as a result of the advances in transportation and communications during the twentieth century, the increased commonality of language, structures and processes associated with globalisation, and the gradual easing of trade barriers. Countries with high labour costs need to be clever if they want to sustain their standard of living. Cleverness depends firstly on continual waves of invention. Beyond invention, a healthy advanced economy demands active innovation: the articulation, adaptation and integration of inventive ideas into existing infrastructure, in order to take advantage of the opportunities latent in the invention. The chilling effect that surveillance brings with it stifles both invention and innovation. All inventors, and many innovators, are, by definition, 'deviant' from the norms of the time. To the extent that they perceive their deviance to put them at risk, they lack the private space in which to experiment.

The philosophical, psychological, physical, social and cultural dimensions of freedoms have tended to dominate the economic aspects. The remainder of this comment focusses on a final aspect — the importance of identity and identity protections to the health of the body politic.

Dissident

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the term 'dissident' to the mid-16th century. Despite variations over time and context, it appears to have never wandered far from its origins in the Latin *dissidere*, to disagree, which in turn derives from *dis-sedere*, to sit apart.

The contemporary sense of the term goes back to the late 18th century, when it referred to a person who expressed disagreement with "the established or dominant form of religion". Since World War II, its dominant usage has been in relation to disagreement in political matters. In the late 1940s, the context was Palestine, and in the mid-1950s the rebellion by the Vietnamese against the French colonial power. Subsequently, its primary use in the free world was in relation to opponents of the Communist regimes behind the Iron Curtain. Notable among them were Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov and Vaclav Havel; but importantly there were also many people who lacked international prominence as a protection and hence remained underground, and published through the samizdat press.

Havel was an important contributor to understanding of the notion. During his own dissident era, he wrote that "the term 'dissident' was ... chosen by Western journalists and is now generally accepted as the label for a phenomenon peculiar to the post-totalitarian system [presumably meaning the post-Nazi, Communist regimes in the countries dominated by the USSR] and almost never occurring — at least not in that form — in democratic societies" (Havel 1978).

Havel noted the subversion of the term by the authorities (in his case, in Czechoslovakia): "A 'dissident', we are told in our press, means something like 'renegade' or 'backslider'. [But] dissidents do not consider themselves renegades for the simple reason that they are not primarily denying or rejecting anything. On the contrary, they have tried to affirm their own human identity, and if they reject anything at all, then it is merely what was false and alienating in their lives, that aspect of living within a lie".

Further, "[dissidents] express their nonconformist positions and critical opinions publicly and systematically, within the very strict limits available to them. They are people who lean toward intellectual pursuits, that is, they are 'writing' people, people for whom the written word is the primary — and often the only — political medium they command, and that can gain them attention, particularly from abroad ... [A] 'dissident' is simply a physicist, a sociologist, a worker, a poet, individuals who are doing what they feel they must and, consequently, who find themselves in open conflict with the regime. This conflict has not come about through any conscious intention on their part, but simply through the inner logic of their thinking, behavior, or work (often confronted with external circumstances more or less beyond their control). They have not, in other words, consciously decided to be professional malcontents..." (Havel 1978).

Although most people to whom the term 'dissident' has been applied lived and live under authoritarian regimes, this is not necessarily the case. Anderson & Davey (1994) applied the title 'American Dissident' to Noam Chomsky. 30 years after Havel wrote his rallying-call for Soviet bloc dissidents, 'dissident' coupled with 'Chomsky' scores considerably more Google hits than it does coupled with 'Havel'. Dissidents in relatively free societies have less need to dissociate themselves from their writing, but they are mindful of the sentiment in the poem attributed to Niemöller (himself a dissident in Nazi Germany): "And then . . . they came for me . . . And by that time there was no one left to speak up". The implication is that freedom to dissent must be exercised while it can be exercised, for fear that the powerful may later suppress that freedom.

A contemporary interpretation might therefore be that a dissident is a person who opposes an established doctrine, policy, institution or government, and actively intellectually challenges it. The word clusters with contrarian, non-conformist, advocate and (intellectual) activist. Being a dissident does not necessarily involve any physical protest or participation in demonstrations, let alone civil disobedience or acts of a violent nature, and hence it does not cluster with (physical) activist, protestor, demonstrator, graffitist, agitator, rioter, insurgent, or terrorist.

Dissidentity

Dissidents who are subjected to repressive regimes require great courage, because they are likely to be subjected to psychological pressure (if they have a substantial profile) or persecution, imprisonment and worse (if they do not). China, Myanmar, North Korea, several Central Asian republics and increasingly Putin's Russia are among the countries in which political dissidents are currently being suppressed.

Dissidents who are subject to a repressive regime have a very apparent need to avoid association of their ideas and writings with their physical selves. They are well advised to resort to underground communications, multiple identities, pseudonyms, and strong protections against their pseudonymity being broken and their multiple identities linked.

In relatively free societies, people who express contrary ideas and arguments face far less serious risks. But protections for identity are still vital, at least in some situations and for some categories of people.

A first context in which identity is significant in political speech is the sanctity of the ballot box. Whether a person votes is not a secret, but it is an expectation in free nations that it not be publicly known, or even knowable, who they vote for, nor even whether the vote they cast is valid or informal. Breach of the ballot privacy of any one person may not be of enormous concern, not least because under representative democracy the voter is only choosing a person to sit in a legislature and has no direct influence on any political decision. Breach is more significant in the case of initiatives, referenda and plebiscites; and is quite critical if the breach is indicative of systemic failure.

The availability of protections for identity is much more important in relation to the authorship of active political speech. A celebrated instance is the argument in 1787–88 against and for ratification by individual States of the U.S. Constitution, most famously the so-called 'Federalist Papers' published under the pseudonym 'Publius' (Madison et al. 1987). This device appears to have been intended in part to avoid exposure of individuals and in part to create an identity that could be assumed by multiple authors.

Of the various categories of persons-at-risk discussed earlier, it is likely that only a few concern themselves with the exercise of freedom of political speech. On the other hand, open societies create scope for physical assault on people who make statements that are unpopular with volatile segments of the population. It is impossible for free societies to ignore the ability to utter political speech of a Salman Rushdie, or a Kåre Bluitgen (the Danish originator of the controversial set of cartoons depicting 'The face of Muhammad'), or a Taslima Nasrin (the feminist Bangladeshi), or leaders of the movement in support of abortion rights in conservative U.S. States.

A further important category of people who are at risk even in relatively free societies is commonly referred to as 'whistleblowers'. These are people who disclose information, generally in breach of laws or terms of employment contract that preclude such disclosure. To qualify as whistleblowing, the information needs to provide evidence of illegal or immoral behaviour, such as corruption and the suppression of information that should have been published. Celebrated instances such as 'Deep Throat', who provided evidence about Nixon's complicity in the Watergate break-in, are vastly outnumbered by workaday leaks (Martin & Rifkin 2004).

Considerable harm has been done, in particular to whistleblowing employees by their employers, and pressure in recent years has resulted in the enactment of protections in some countries. The legal protections remain weak, however. More practical and effective protection is offered by anonymity services, both of a generalised nature (e.g. Internet traffic anonymisers — EPIC 2007, Tor 2008) and specifically targetted at whistleblowing (such as Wikileaks).

The threats to political freedoms in the near future will come not only from nation-states, but also from corporations. Corporations have achieved very large scale and supra-nationality, and are exercising their influence in order to achieve increasing freedom from regulation and considerable powers in such areas as the protection of the intellectual property that they have amassed. Further, through outsourcing and public-private partnerships, corporations are gaining control of national infrastructure, access to personal data acquired by government agencies, and the power to impose fines.

A particularly disturbing development is the explosion in for-profit, supra-national mercenaries. Private police forces, once seen as a phenomenon associated only with un-free countries, are burgeoning. Industry associations have been formed to seek respectability for the concept of 'Private Military Companies' (PMCs). As national security and law enforcement agencies become more dependent upon such companies, they appear very likely to achieve the same lack of independent control as official military forces and police forces enjoy.

During the coming decades, the powerful will have ample opportunities to suppress different-thinkers, including not only the (currently waning) excuse of terrorism, but also religious fundamentalism, over-population, illegal immigration, natural resource shortages, competition for water and global warming. During the first few years of the new millennium, anti-freedom lobbyists succeeded in their efforts to achieve new so-called 'counter-terrorism' laws, which have greatly increased the scope for political repression. The survival of free societies is dependent on the rights to multiple identities and nymity becoming engrained, as insurance against continuation and periodic resurgence of the anti-freedom movement.

Conclusion

In political contexts as in economic ones, innovation is good for society. But innovation is uncomfortable for those in power. It is pursued, by definition, by contrarians, different-thinkers, deviants and dissidents. It is opposed, on the other hand, by those who are threatened by change, and by those who believe that risks need to be suppressed rather than managed.

Sustaining progress depends on the protection of innovators, and that in turn depends on people being, and feeling, free to propose, discuss, articulate and publish new ideas. A cluster of freedoms relating to human identities is fundamental to cultural, economic and political innovation:

- the freedom to have and to use multiple identities
- the freedom to express ideas by means of pseudonyms
- the freedom to avoid linkage among identities

These freedoms are under current threat by the arrogant ideas inherent in the 'identity management' movement, by the presumptuousness of 'identity provision-ing' by corporations and governments, and by the tendency among hitherto free nations such as the U.K., the U.S. and Australia to destroy privacy-protective silo'd identities and impose national identification schemes.

Politically, people need to be free to think, and argue, and act. Surveillance chills behaviour and speech, and undermines democracy. The discussions of identity and identities that will take place in this new journal need to reflect the philosophical, psychological, physical, social, cultural and economic reasons for valuing freedoms. Crucially, they must also do something that many academic disciplines find uncomfortable — the discussions in this journal must be policy-relevant, and must embrace the political dimension implied by the term 'dissidentity'.

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